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## **Europe of Networks or the European Public Sphere? Four plus One Approaches**

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## Europe of Networks or the European Public Sphere? Four plus One Approaches

**Santrauka.** Pagrindinė straipsnyje plėtojama idėja yra ta: užuot siekę įrodyti, kad Europoje egzistuoja viešoji erdvė, arba, priešingai, kad viešoji erdvė ar viešosios erdvės dar nesusiformavusios, turėtume žvelgti į Europą kaip į daugialypių tinklų darinį. Šiuose tinkluose – daug savitų viešųjų erdvių. Konceptija, kuri viešąją sritį siūlo tirti remiantis daugialypių tinklų idėja, kritiškai vertina tradicinį Jürgeno Habermaso požiūrį, kuris traktuoja viešąją sritį kaip darinį, iš esmės ribojamą nacionalinių sienų. Socialiniai ir kultūriniai tinklai plėtojami visose gyvenimo srityse. Laikui bėgant, jie bręsta, kinta, gerokai išsiplečia. Šiandieną sunku aiškiai skirti įvairius tinklus, kurie tinkamai funkcionuoja vietiniame, nacionaliniame, transnacionaliniame, regioniniame, viršregioniniame, taipogi ir globaliame, lygmenyse. Vis dėlto, remiantis demokratijos teorijos principais, svarbu apibrėžti erdvines skirtingų tinklų formas, nes jos visos nusako skirtingus demokratinės politikos modalumus. Demokratija vietiniame arba nacionaliniame lygmenyse turi būti traktuojama kitaip, negu demokratija transnacionaliniame arba globaliame lygmenyse.

**Keywords:** European public sphere, social networks, European communication policy.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Europos viešoji erdvė, socialiniai tinklai, Europos komunikacijos politika.

### 1. Introduction

The main argument in this article is that instead of attempting to establish the existence or the non-existence of the European public sphere or public spheres, we could think of Europe as consisting of a multiplicity of networks, each having a public sphere or spheres of their own.<sup>1</sup> These networks operate in all areas of life, but most fundamentally they are social and cultural in their origin. These networks have developed, transformed, and vastly expanded in time. It is difficult to make

clear distinctions between different networks today as they can operate locally, nationally, trans-nationally, regionally, trans-regionally as well as globally. However, from the point of view of democratic theory it is still important to make a distinction between these different spatial embodiments of networks, as they all indicate different modalities for democratic politics. Democracy needs to be thought differently on a local or national scale than on the trans-national or global scale.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is written as a part of the research project “European Public Sphere(s): Uniting and Dividing”, funded by the Academy of Finland (2005–2007). See <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/blogs/eupus/>.

The idea of seeing the public sphere from the point of view of networks is critical to the traditional idea of conceiving the public sphere as something intrinsically restricted to national boundaries (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007; Nieminen 2006). In terms of the development of the national public sphere, for example, that started to get shape in Finland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was a very complex set of networks – personal, family-tied, education-bound, professional, social and cultural ties – which formed the basic fabric for the emergence of national public life.

Applying a network-based approach to the Habermasian type of historical narrative, the national public sphere started to get established and institutionalised in the form of public debates by civic associations and newspapers. From the network point of view, this always took place through and against of the pre-publicity of social and cultural networks. Publicly exercised critical-rational debates can be understood in terms of publicised contests between different networks – or, in other terms, between elite groups against each other. The emerging national state estab-

lished the framework for this contestation; it was in the framework of the resources available – economic, social, cultural, administrative – that the competition between the networks was exercised.

Until the early 2000s, the problem with most theorising on the public sphere was that it had not much to say about the preconditions for the public sphere transgressing the national boundaries – transnational, regional, European or global public spheres. The situation has now, however, rapidly changed, and the European public sphere has become a hot topic for research.

## 2. A European Public Sphere?

In the last years academic literature on the European public sphere has been expanding. A number of research projects – smaller and bigger ones – have been established around the European public sphere, many of them funded by the European Union (Schlesinger 2007, 66–67).<sup>2</sup> In a sense, an academic industry has developed around that topic. However, although there have appeared numerous different ways to ap-

<sup>2</sup> Some of the projects can be listed here as an example – and also in order to show the area of their interest:

- AIM: Adequate Information Management in Europe. (<http://www.aim-project.net/index.php?id=4>; retrieved 24.10.2007)
- CIDEL: Citizenship and Democratic Legitimacy in Europe. (<http://www.arena.uio.no/cidel/index.html>; retrieved 24.10.2007)
- EMEDIATE: Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the “War on Terror”. (<http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/EMEDIATE/Index.shtml>; retrieved 24.10.2007)
- EUROPUB.COM: The Transformation of Political Mobilisation and Communication in European Public Spheres. ([http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/knowledge/projects/article\\_3479\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/knowledge/projects/article_3479_en.htm); retrieved 24.10.2007)
- Eurosphere: <http://www.eurosphere.uib.no/about.php>
- IDNET: Europeanization, Collective Identities, and Public Discourses. ([http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/knowledge/projects/article\\_3501\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/knowledge/projects/article_3501_en.htm); retrieved 24.10.2007)
- RECON: Reconstituting Democracy in Europe. (<http://www.arena.uio.no/recon/>; retrieved 24.10.2007)

proach the European public sphere, its analytic definition has remained surprisingly vague – and its research seems still to suffer of rather a non-reflexive application of what is called the Habermasian *ideal-typisch* way of understanding what the public sphere is about (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007).

## 2.1 Notion of Public Sphere

In the course of years the public sphere has been defined in a number of different ways. As it is customarily remarked, the term “Public Sphere” – with capital letters – began to appear in the Anglo-American media and communication research originally in the 1980s and 1990s. The term was adopted from the English translations of the texts by Jürgen Habermas as an English correlative for the term *Öffentlichkeit* (Kleinstüber 2001). For Habermas, the public sphere is the basic functional principle in a democratic society and it refers to the ideal of democratic communication. In a Habermasian sense, the ideal of the public sphere is characterised by the following principles:

- access to public debate is free and open to everybody,
- all participants in public debate are considered as equal,
- no subjects and topics are excluded from the debate,
- the result of public deliberation is judged only on the basis of best arguments
- the aim of the debate is consensus and unanimity (Habermas 1989; 36–37; Calhoun 1992b; Roberts and Crossley 2004).

Today there is a more or less shared consensus among the research community that the “really existing” public sphere does not correspond to these ideal claims, if it ever has. Despite this, the ideal notion still has a strong influence in almost all academic discussions on public sphere or public spheres. The reason for this is probably that the ideal notion seems to match our understanding of the principles and values of our Western liberal democracy – as if the ideals of public sphere were realisable, as if we could make public debate free and equal, as if the public deliberation could be at its best judged only on the basis of the best arguments, and as if the deliberation could eventually establish something like “the Truth” of the matter under discussion. In this sense, the public sphere can act as a regulative idea against which we can measure democracy today.

As we are also familiar with, the Habermasian approach (or the common caricature that has often been painted of his original rather complex account) has been criticised from different directions. Some points of critique have been as follows (Calhoun 1992b; Fraser 1992; Roberts and Crossley 2004):

- Historical arguments: Habermas’ account is historically idealized, and that there has never been such a phase in history as he claims. Also the public sphere as an ideal is based on a specific interpretation of certain national experiences in Europe – namely, in Britain, and to some degree also in France and Germany; as such, it cannot be “transplanted” to other cultural and social environments.

- Arguments of political theory type: Habermas' claim that all communication is based on striving for consensus is too narrow and leads to the exclusion of differences. The ideal democracy cannot be based on the claim towards homogeneity and consensualism – or achieving “the Truth” for that matter. The concept needs pluralisation – we should not speak of “a public sphere” or “the public sphere” but of plurality of public spheres, reflecting real differences in the society.
- Feminist critique: Habermas' account only universalises the gender-based distinction between the male-dominated public sphere and female private sphere – and in this way it only justifies the patriarchal social order.
- Another critical strand has criticized Habermas of being too “Hegelian”: that he takes the nation state as a natural framework in the way of historical progress, and does not seriously discuss the social, cultural and other differences both within and between the nation states.

Habermas has answered to this critique in several instances (Habermas 1992), and since the 1970s he has transformed his own conception of the public sphere in many ways (Habermas 1996; Habermas 2006b). However, even after all this criticism and with all these qualifications, most of the critics still use the Habermas' early conceptualisation of the public sphere also as their own critical normative point of reference in their own

research – mostly because there has not been any other comparable historically argued framework for discussing these matters.

## 2.2 European Public Sphere as a “Hot Topic”

As I described above, the European public sphere – more or less in its idealised Habermasian form – has been a subject of increasing interest in the last ten years or so, at least if judged by the number of projects and by the amount of resources allocated. Why is this?

We can see two camps that have approached the European public sphere from different directions. Firstly, there are the “Eurocrats” or those European policy makers who are worried about the worsening legitimacy crisis of the EU and its institutions. The situation deteriorated especially after the European Constitution was rejected in referenda in France and the Netherlands in summer 2005. For this camp, the European public sphere is seen as a means to enhance and strengthen initiatives which may lead to more popular support to European integration. This is one explanation why the EU has directed money for research on the European public sphere; the wish is that the research would provide cure for the situation (Niemi-nen 2007).

Secondly, from the scholarly side: there is a concern for Europe by quite a number of democratically minded scholars. What they see happening in Europe is the alarming increase in disintegrative and antidemocratic tendencies, and growing social and political

divisions that the neo-liberal policies seem to increase. For this camp, the European public sphere represents an attempt to create new common political ground and to democratise European politics. Also, to many of them, the European public sphere is seen as promoting an antidote to the USA's unilateral globalism: Europe should be given a voice of its own in the globalising world – and the presumption is that the European public sphere would then make it more reasoned and enlightened (Habermas and Derrida 2005; Habermas 2006a).

As there are so many different expectations towards the European public sphere, it is not always clear what different actors really mean or what kind of value-based expectations they have invested in this concept. There are a number of critical questions which can be directed to both the Eurocrats and the critical scholars. Some of them are:

- What is the Europe that we are speaking of? There is no one Europe but there are always many different ones, depending on who and why is speaking; Europe is not a geographical entity, it is not a continent, as e.g. Asia, North- and South America, Australia are. Europe is a mental and political construction, based on historical traditions (Cameron and Neal 2003; Rietbergen 2006).
- Is the concept of the public sphere applicable to the European level at all? Originally the Habermasian concept

was developed as an historical account of certain European nation states and their ways of industrialisation and democratization. Most empirical research has been performed on national scale. Is it feasible to try to transplant the concept from a national level to a trans-national level? (Fraser 2007).

- The national public sphere includes a strong popular national commitment. Can we imagine a popular commitment to Europe in the same way? Such concepts as “identity”, “solidarity”, “reciprocity”, and “trust” have been seen necessary for a national public sphere. How are they dealt with in the concepts of the European public sphere? (Calhoun 2002).
- The national public spheres are strongly dependent on national linguistic communities and national media systems. How are these restrictions thought to be solved within the framework of the European public sphere? (Schlesinger 2003).

### 3. Four Approaches to the European Public Sphere

The distinction between the Eurocrats and critical scholars presented above is rough enough to draw a general picture, but a more detailed approach is needed in order to understand the limitations of the imaginary

<sup>3</sup> Here I use social imaginary in Charles Taylor's sense: it is about “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004; 23).

behind the concept of the European public sphere.<sup>3</sup> In the recent literature we can find four main ways in approaching the issue. In what follows they will be called the *pragmatic*, the *processual*, the *sceptical*, and the *radical-critical* understandings of the European public sphere.

### 3.1 Pragmatic or Affirmative Approach

This is characteristic to the European Commission way of thinking – in the Commission's documents, in the speeches of Commissars and Commission workers. This approach is exemplified in the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* by the EC in February 2006, in the *Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* in October 2005, and *Communicating Europe in Partnership* in October 2007 (White Paper on Communication 2006; Plan-D 2005; Communicating Europe 2007). The basic claim of this approach can be said to be that the elements for the European public sphere are there, the problem is in the execution of the European Union's PR-work and communication.

If the elements are there, who are to blame that the European public sphere does not seem to be working as it should be? According to the above mentioned documents, the guilt lies with the following factors:

- the European Union's own PR-work and communication have been deficient;
- the long-standing and still continuing blame game between the European Commission and the EU member states has given a bad image to the whole Union;

- national politicians have scored cheap points by blaming the Brussels' bureaucrats of their own political failures, and vice versa;
- European media are not interested in all-European issues and they give a wrong picture of what is important; European issues are not given enough emphasis and the media do not value them as the news.

What is needed to solve the situation are just practical things: we need to improve the execution of the European Union's communication; we need to have better work with the media; we need to make the EU institutions more effective; we need to educate the communication professionals and make them more skilful, etc. (Plan-D 2005; Period of Reflection 2006; Communicating Europe 2007).

The problem with this approach is that it maintains a rather bureaucratic understanding of communication and the public sphere. The main thing seems to be in getting the message through, which represents a one-way model of communication. From this point of view, citizens seem to be important only to the degree that they can be activated to react to the initiatives from above, and by these means engaged into an organised dialogue – or consultation, as the EU-term goes.

### 3.2 Processual Approach

According to this line of thinking, we are on the road towards a democratic European public sphere, but although our direction is right, its realisation still needs much work. This approach appears typical, for example,



of more legally oriented scholars and political scientists. They are not satisfied of how things are today: they see that the existing European public sphere is still too elitist and dependent on the elite media. We can, however, observe clear progress towards the real European-wide public sphere. This was exemplified, among others, in the European Union's constitutional process in the early years of the 2000s that included many encouraging deliberative elements (Eriksson 2005).

According to many proponents of this approach, in order to develop into more democratic direction, the European public sphere requires better and legally binding rules and procedures. For this purpose the European constitution is a necessity. A widely accepted notion is also a distinction between different functional levels of the public sphere:

- there are "weak" or general publics, consisting of people's everyday communication; this level is not politically oriented;
- there are segmented publics, which are mainly issue based and aimed at influencing political decision makers; this level includes social movements and civic activities, etc;
- there are strong publics of decision makers, embodied by such institutional fora as the European Parliament and the European Conventions (Eriksen 2005; Eriksen 2007).

The European Union's legitimacy crisis shows that today the distance between the segmented publics and the strong publics is much too wide. The issues which are discussed and problematised in the segmented public spheres

cannot penetrate or reach the realities of the strong public spheres: the effective interlinks are missing (Eriksen 2005; Eriksen 2007).

The problem of this processual approach is that it is far too abstract. There seems to be no effective answers on how to strengthen the missing interlinks and how to promote the procedures which are necessary for a functioning democratic European public sphere.

### 3.3 Sceptical Approach

The proponents of this strand of thought are not confident at all that we are on the right track, and that the democratic European public sphere will follow as a natural result of European development. This approach is mainly represented by social and cultural theorists and media scholars. They see that Europe is more characterized by disintegration than integration today, and more disunity than unity. According to this approach, structural changes are necessary in Europe, otherwise the case for a more democratic Europe is lost. The European Union and other existing European structures as they are today are seen as forming more obstacles than acting as facilitators in the way towards a democratic European public sphere (Levy et al., 2005).

The sceptical strand also includes emphasis that the Europeans should defend their social and cultural traditions and achievements better. The European liberal-democratic legacy is in danger: the European way of thinking on social, cultural and political issues is endangered by the USA-led neo-liberal and neo-conservative global agendas. What Europe needs is a global strategy of its own. Such



issues as environment, immigration, globalisation, and security can only be tackled with global cooperation, and Europe should lead the way (Habermas 2006; Levy et al., 2005).

What this new European sense of global responsibility requires is common European identity, not in a sense that it would supersede other sources of identity, but as an additional dimension. Its emergence will be a slow but necessary process, and it will be also very uneven: some nations are more ready and willing to adopt a wider European identity than some others (Habermas and Derrida 2005; Habermas 2006c).

The democratic re-instituting of Europe cannot take place without major structural changes, such as the democratic European constitution and the creation of effective European citizenship. This, however, requires a fundamental re-definition of the European Union's basic dynamics: instead of economy, human and social values must be put to the forefront in the European Union's policies. This would mean to challenge the basic power relations in Europe as they are today (Habermas 2006a).

The problem of the sceptical approach is its embedded social and cultural pessimism. It is very difficult to discern an optimistic positive political programme that would convince us of the democratic potentialities of today's European reality.

### 3.4 Radical-Critical Approach

Basically, the proponents of this approach are saying that the European public sphere is a wrong answer to a wrong ques-

tion, and that it is based on an old fashioned way of political thinking. For them, the European public sphere represents the infamous idea of creating unity from above, and from this it follows that it promotes centralised and universalistic thinking. It is necessary to recognise that instead of consensus, the basis of politics is always conflict – there are different interests which need to be negotiated – and it is always conflictual or agonistic (Mouffe 2002).

The basic thing is that first we have to recognise the differences: politics can start only after we have recognised the differences, i.e. the real choices on which we have to choose and decide. Differences are not something that should only be tolerated by the majority, but they are the constitutive factor of all politics.

The problem with the concept of public sphere is that it exemplifies a top-down model of politics. Instead of genuine pluralism and the recognition of differences, it promotes forced homogeneity. From the point of view of the radical-critical approach, the whole concept of public sphere should be rejected. Instead of talking about a or the public sphere – or even in plural public spheres – we should use the concept of public space and spaces, as they refer to something that is less normative and more open to conflicts and contestations (Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006).

### 3.5 Criticism: Two Types of Fallacies

The main problem with the different approaches presented above is that they all are still tied too much to a nation state type of

social and cultural imaginary. At least the three first mentioned approaches appear to be stuck with certain Euro-essentialism or idealisation of Europe: as if Europe could act as a one polity; as if it could or should form a one unified political entity – following the way that the European nation states are thought to be acting.

The problem is, however, that European nation states don't function that way, like unified political entities, at least according to today's democratic criteria. This is obvious, e.g. with Germany, the UK, France, the Netherlands, etc: instead of unified entities, they are suffering from continuous social and cultural tensions. European politics are today increasingly conflictual and unstable. There are no natural national identities, no self-evident feelings of solidarity, no inclusive national media – all these attributes have been challenged today.

From the point of view of the ideal notion of the European public sphere, the problem is that if the nation state way of social and cultural imaginary does not work well on the national state level in today's Europe, as there are legitimacy crises everywhere, how do we think these centralised structures would function on the European level? (Fraser 2007).

Moreover, the fourth approach – the radical-democratic approach – also seems to suffer from the same kind of a nation state type of bias. It seems that the differences, whose re-

cognition the proponents of radical democracy call for, are actually the results of the nation state way of imagining polity and political sphere. The question is who, in the first hand, is to set the rules and policies for recognition? From where does this authority receive his or her authority? And what happens after the differences are recognised – how is the negotiation between different recognised parties arranged, who sets the rules and who acts as the arbiter? How will the outcomes be derived from the contestation, and who is to judge what compromises are valid and acceptable and which not? – It seems that answers to all these questions necessarily concern the structures and institutions of the national polity.

#### **4. Another Approach: Europe as Social and Cultural Networks**

Next, an example of what is here called Euro-essentialism will be presented. An often used way to define the European public sphere is the following (Risse and Van de Steeg 2003):<sup>4</sup>

“An ideal typical European public sphere would then emerge

1. if and when the same (European) themes are discussed at the same time at similar levels of attention across national public spheres and media;
2. if and when similar frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation are used across national public spheres and media;

<sup>4</sup> Same type of definition has been used also e.g. by European Commission Vice President Margot Wallström. See Wallström 2007.

3. if and when a transnational community of communication emerges in which speakers and listeners not only observe each other across national spaces, but also recognize that “Europe” is an issue of common concern for them.”

What makes this definition problematic is the notion of the national public sphere, presented here as un-problematical and non-contested, seemingly following the Habermasian ideal notion. The logic seems to be that, first, we should have national public spheres in different or in all European countries – which, by definition, must first fulfil the basic conditions described above, so that they can then together create the European public sphere.

The problem is, though, that we don’t find anywhere such national public spheres that would fit into the model pictured above. The themes are not nationally discussed at the same time at similar levels of attention; there are no similar national frames of reference and patterns of interpretation which would be shared by the whole population; and there are a number of ways of defining and understanding what the “nation” means to different social and cultural groups in any nation.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1 A Network Perspective

As argued above, another way to imagine public spheres is to think of them as

social and cultural networks. According to this approach, Europe has always existed in the form of multiple social and cultural networks: long before the birth of European nation states there were local, regional, transnational, trans-regional, and global networks that connected different people in different parts of Europe both between themselves and with the rest of the world.

The concept of a network has recently been employed in several different ways in social sciences. One branch is represented by Manuel Castells’ technologically informed network theory. Another is the actor-network-theory (ANT) developed especially by Bruno Latour. The third direction is more a methodological approach represented by the network analysis as a method. Different applications of network theory are utilised in political science; and so on.<sup>6</sup>

The network is understood here in a wide sense. Basically, a network consists of more or less regular connections between people; these connections are motivated by different things – personal, social, cultural, economic, etc.; the regularity brings about certain conventions and rules which then characterise the network and bring more institutionalised features to it; etc. In other words, social and cultural networks are historically evolved chains of human interaction, which have certain regulative effect upon our ways of living, thinking, and acting.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most perceptive criticisms to this direction has been put forward by Nancy Fraser, who in her recent article maintains that our ways of speaking the public sphere suffers of – what she calls – “Westphalian-national presuppositions of the classical theory of the public sphere”. See Fraser 2005; 2007.

<sup>6</sup> A good overview on different uses of network is in Knox, Savage & Harvey 2005. See also e.g. Contractor 2003; Cook, Cheshire & Gerbasi 2006; Degenne & Forsé 1999; Law 1992; Stalder 2006.

## 4.2 Three Takes on Networks

As stated above, the problem with much of the research on the European public sphere derives from its type of normative critique. It tends to be based on an ideal notion of the public sphere, against which the reality is then measured. From “reality” only such features are selected that either match or do not match with the ideal criteria. To reiterate the criticism of the attempts to establish the European public sphere or multiple spheres through critical research, three basic arguments are provided:

- Firstly, there is no European public as such, but a vast number of local, regional, national and transnational publics; they do not necessarily correlate, they are not necessarily corresponding, and they are not necessarily commensurate in size, extent or duration.
- Secondly, there are no European media or common communication infrastructure, but there is a plethora of local, regional, national and transnational media that seldom follow the same political, ideological, religious, and cultural agenda.
- Thirdly, there are no commonly shared and accepted pan-European frames of reference or patterns of interpretation, and as Europe is becoming more and more genuinely multi-cultural, it is very difficult to see a way to establish such frames and patterns.

The notion of Europe of social and cultural networks tries to overcome these problems by abandoning the embedded normative mode of criticism derived from the ideal notion of the public sphere, but trying at the same time to save its democratic core. In the following, the network approach will be discussed from three perspectives: from historical, sociological, and political perspectives.

### 1) *Historically*

The basic claim here is that it was networks that created Europe; even before there was an idea of what Europe is about, there was an infrastructure of trans-European cooperation and communication based on different kinds of networks. According to this approach, Europe has always existed in the form of multiple social and cultural networks – local, regional, transnational, trans-regional, semi-global, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the earliest networks that can be called European, in the late-modern sense of the word, were commercial. In the Middle Ages trade relations started to get established and regular commercial institutions started to emerge. European trade routes developed and institutionalised (e.g. The Hanseatic League was established in 1157; the great European financier families started to rise to power – the Fuggers, the Medicis, the de la Poles). Europe began to get shape in the form of a rather loose economic network, consisting of several regional bases.

The church developed into the most influential network of networks in the Middle

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<sup>7</sup> Among the sources for this historical account are: Jordan 2002; Jordan 2002; Cameron & Neal 2003; Power 2006; Rietbergen 2006; Sprout 1994; Wilson & van der Dussen 1999.

Ages. The Roman Catholic Church was the first to establish a trans-European system of governance. By AD 1000 most of Europe was “Christianised”, leaving only the most Northern parts (Scandinavia and the Baltic lands) to be Christianised later in the Middle Ages. The power of the Church – both the Western Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodoxy – was not seriously challenged until the Western reformation movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Church gradually started to fragment into several competing networks.

European networks of literate elite also started to evolve. Several European universities and academies of letters were established during the High and Late Middle Ages. Universities and academic scholars formed widely influential and very active networks which were really trans-national in character. The University of Bologna was established in 1088, the University of Paris in 1100, and the University of Oxford in the 11th century. The famous scholars of the times followed closely the developments in science and communicated actively, not only by letters but also visiting each other regularly.

Trades and crafts networks also developed in the Middle Ages. The tradition of apprentices and artisans – blacksmiths, masons, printers, cabinetmakers, etc. – travelling around Europe in order to gain new skills and to become competent for a trade master became established. Also the multiple networks of arts and culture flourished: writers, painters, travelling musicians, theatre groups, tra-

velling performers, etc. have all been the part of the long history of Europe of networks.

From the point of view of the network approach, what is noteworthy is that these networks developed and functioned, firstly, without a pan-European language: Latin, French, German, and other languages were used, depending on the network; secondly, without a pan-European identity: the shared frames of reference were those adopted as a part of the membership of a network; and thirdly, without a pan-European system of communication: each network developed a functional way of communicating both within the network and between the other networks of their own.

## 2) *Sociologically*

The description above concerns what can be called functional networks that developed in time from local and regional networks to much wider and even transnational structures. Of course, not all networks are like this: different networks serve different purposes. We can initially make a rough division between four or five types of networks relevant to our purposes here:<sup>8</sup>

1. Primary or formative networks, which concern our primary engagements to society and the world in general (micro level). We are born into social and cultural networks, and our way of living is networking. Our primary identification takes place within and through a close network of family; emotionally, we – or most of us, at least – belong to the network of our family and kin members, or extended family network. On this level we are left very

<sup>8</sup> This model is partly inspired by the discussion in Knox, Savage & Harvey, 2005.

little room for negotiating our own room and role within the network. We have to adapt – or break out.

2. Societal networks (semi-meso level), which concern our formal socialisation and membership of a formal community, such as networks based on professional or educational relationships, but also include networks based on shared living environments – i.e. neighbourhood networks. As these relations are usually based on our organisational or institutional roles, they are mostly non-negotiable as long as we occupy those particular roles; but they can be re-negotiated or dispensed if and when we leave the roles, for example, when changing the profession or when retiring. As role-based networks, they can be utilised in different ways, which means that although their membership is principally non-negotiable, the way how they are used can be very flexible.

3. Associational networks (meso level) are based on voluntary and free time associations (e.g. hobby related) or they can be based on work place relations. Although the membership in these kind of networks is conditional to the availability of opportunities (the selection of potential hobbies can be restricted in many ways; the availability of free time associations can be limited; the work environments are different, and there are a number of people permanently out of work), membership in these networks is usually based more on choice: we can regulate, at least to a certain degree, our commitment to these types of networks.

4. Issue or interest based networks create another level (semi-macro level), whose

character is defined by their aim to influence the decision making. This links these networks to political will formation and thus to the political realm. These networks can be, for example, party political, professional or trade based, ideological or religious in nature. Characteristically these networks are based on voluntary membership and high level of personal commitment.

5. Imposed networks (macro level), which concern us as citizens or the members of the political nation. The membership of these networks is non-negotiable, which means that we share certain basic duties and rights with all the other members which in normal circumstances cannot be waived. It seems important to make a clear distinction between the formal structure of the institution which gives the frame for the network and the real network: for example, in Finland all young men are conscripted and thus institutionalised in the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF). The FDF gives cultural and social frames for the network: it regulates the issues and activities of the network, but the meaning and values that the network embodies are created by the members.

Principally, we live our social and cultural lives in and through these networks. We cannot escape them even if we try. To a great extent it is not accidental at all to what kind of networks we belong to or are members of: there are selective mechanisms, inclusive and exclusive as well, which regulate our access to different networks. The selective mechanisms are manifold: they are based, for example, on class, gender, ethnicity, education, area of residence, cultural background, and so on.

### 3) *Politically*

From this point of view, we can also ask if the emergence of public government and the basic function of public structures – local government, nation states, regional and international organizations – can be interpreted as resulting from the need of different networks to exercise cooperation. The networks that operate in the same geographical area or region must necessarily take each other into consideration and develop at least some degree of cooperation, as they have to share the same geographical area or certain basic resources – such as water, living area, roads, energy sources, location of market places, etc. In order to solve the competing claims peacefully the networks have to create a system of negotiation and coordination of action, i.e. a system of common government.

From the point of view of network hypothesis this can be seen as the start of local and regional governance: it emerged first and foremost in order to coordinate the use of common resources and to arrange negotiations between competing claims and interests by the networks. A developmental line from the medieval city councils to local or municipal authorities of today might be detected here. Applied to the national level, national states can be understood as intersections of different networks (embodied first, for example, in the King's councils, later in history in political parties and lobby networks organised as state governments), established in order to negotiate their conflicting interests and to help in coordinating the use of common resources in matters concerning the use of resources on the level of the national state.

However, an important qualification must be mentioned here: in all matters other than concerning the direct interests of the emerging national state, the networks were originally meant to be autonomous and self-regulating, such as in the areas of international trade, political and ideological movements, religious issues, etc.

Thus, instead of an open, ideal-type of public sphere and critical debate aiming at consensus, what we have on the national level is a space for public negotiation between organised interests, restricted and regulated according to the issues and themes which are of national character. From this perspective, public political structures – such as local governments and nation states – can be seen as “knots” or intersections between the networks that operate on a that particular geographical level: there are issues that need to be coordinated between different networks – economy, social security, energy, immigration, environment, etc. The European Union can also be seen as a crossroad or an intersection of a multiplicity of transnational European networks, connected with common European issues. From this perspective, also the European Union can be understood as an intersection whose function is to coordinate the use of common resources, and for this purpose, to arrange negotiations between different competing interests.

What does all this mean from the point of view of an individual member of society? Just to make a brief re-instatement: people's primary engagement to society and culture is always through their memberships in different networks; and their understanding of



citizenship and citizenry is always interpreted in the first hand through these communities of interpretation.

## 5. Conclusions: Networks and the Public Sphere

Where does this approach leave then the concept of the public sphere? What it allows us to do is to see more clearly the conditions for the normative application of the notion of the public sphere: what we should do and what we should not do with it. What it does not mean, however, is that we should totally abandon the public sphere as a normative regulative principle. Instead, it seems to suggest that we should direct our attention to a more procedural concept of the public sphere.

As we observe now the society consisting of a multiplicity of networks, we can see that some networks are more democratic and equal than others. It does not appear realistic to imagine that there would be much in common that all the networks would share – such as universal values or norms or beliefs. All modes of networks – from kin networks to religious, professional and political networks – are based on some kind of membership, which necessarily brings about rules

of exclusion and inclusion. In certain issues many of the networks can potentially find common interest and ground for negotiation; in many or perhaps most issues this would not be the case. Thus, it does not appear realistic to set the ideal-normative model of the public sphere as a general model for the society consisting of networks.

If we now would like to re-introduce the concept of the public sphere within the framework of the network approach, the public sphere would perhaps best be understood as a space or spaces of negotiation between different networks. In the course of negotiation process, each network brings publicly out its interest-based claims, and the public discourse is then about negotiating between competing claims. The result is always some sort of a compromise, balancing competing interests. This inevitably raises the question of power: the networks are not equal in relation to their negotiation competence, that is, in their ability to influence the resulting compromise. Some networks have more resources and potential to influence the result while some networks are without such resources and thus are left with little or none negotiation power. The question of power, then, remains unsolved.

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## ABSTRACT

The main argument in this article is that instead of attempting to establish the existence or the non-existence of the European public sphere or public spheres, we could think of Europe as consisting of a multiplicity of networks, each having a public sphere or spheres of their own. The idea of seeing the public sphere from the point of view of networks is critical to the traditional Habermasian idea of conceiving the public sphere as something intrinsically restricted to national boundaries.

The social and cultural networks operate in all areas of life. They have developed, transformed, and vastly expanded in time. It is difficult to make clear distinctions between different networks today as they can operate locally, nationally, trans-nationally, regionally, trans-regionally as well as globally. However, from the point of view of democratic theory it is still important to make a separation between these different spatial embodiments of the networks as they all indicate different modalities for democratic polities. Democracy needs to be thought differently on a local or national scale than on the trans-national or global scale. The idea of seeing the public sphere from the point of view of networks is critical to the traditional idea of conceiving the public sphere as something intrinsically restricted to national boundaries.

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